

Brill's Encyclopedia of Sikhism

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edited by

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Volume I:
History
Literature
Society
Beyond Punjab

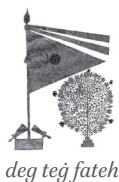
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The artistic depiction on the spine, in a manuscript of the *Gurū Granth* dated to 1775, enshrines the aspiration of the Khālsā Panth to establish Khālsā Rāj. The *niśān* (flag), with two *caurs* (ceremonial peacock-feather whisks) at its base, symbolizes the *fateh* ("victory"), while the imprints of *deg* ("cauldron," i.e. food) and *teḡ* ("sword," i.e. justice) express its ongoing responsibility to provide welfare for all humans and nature, the latter presented in the form of a tree in full blossom with sunbirds savoring the nectar.

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Kabīr in the *Gurū Granth*

Kabīr is without doubt the most widely known and revered North Indian spiritual thinker and mystic (*sant*) of the medieval period. His thoughts, embodied in poems, songs, and short epigrammatic couplets, often sound as radical and unsettling to the present-day listener, or reader, as they did to his contemporaries. From the second half of the 16th century at least, his verses reverberated throughout large parts of North India, from his home area in the Banaras region in the east to Punjab and Rajasthan in the west. To his later followers, his message was always more important than the particulars of his worldly existence, which can today be reconstructed only in its barest outlines.

From the few references found in his own poems – or in poems attributed to him – we know that he was a member of a community of *Julāhās* (weavers) who were settled in Banaras; their low social status, which resulted from their occupation, was not improved by their conversion to Islam. Kabīr is a Muslim name, but the Islamization of the community was probably rather shallow (for a skeptical view of the influence of Islam on Kabīr, Nānak, and the Sant tradition in general, see McLeod, 2000, 19–36). He himself did not receive any formal Islamic education, and probably no formal education at all. He was free to develop his own approach to religious questions, and the presence of numerous religious communities in the holy city was for him a constant source of both inspiration and criticism. He developed a particularly critical attitude toward religious formalism and its representatives – the Hindu and Muslim religious elites who monopolized the access to God and misused it to perpetuate their elevated social position. Kabīr was married and, according to the Sikh tradition, had two sons and two daughters. Poems extant in the Sikh and Rajasthani traditions refer to his conflicts with authorities, which resulted in two unsuccessful attempts on his life, one by drowning and the other by being trampled on by an elephant. His uncompromising piety and total devotion to God reached a point where he left his family and chose the life of an ascetic. He died in Maghar, a village about 190 km north of Banaras, and was buried there. In 1450, Bijli Hān, an administrator of that locality and one of his Muslim followers, built a cenotaph on the spot. Kabīr was said to have died

two years before its construction. If this information is correct, the year 1448 represents the only firm date that helps us fix his life on a time axis (Vaudeville, 1997, 46, 52–55). However, there is no consensus on this point and several scholars (most forcefully Lorenzen, 1991, 9–18) argued for the year 1518 as the date of Kabīr's death. The traditional Hindu and Kabīrpanthī accounts mark off Kabīr's life by the dates 1398–1518.

Kabīr and Gurū Nānak

In the context of questions concerning the reception of Kabīr's message by the emerging Sikh community, the year 1448 is a potentially important date, as it disproves traditional accounts of a personal meeting between Kabīr and Gurū Nānak (1469–1539). These stories appear in the *janamsākhīs*, legendary biographies of Gurū Nānak, where Kabīr accepts him as his supreme *gurū* (McLeod, 1968, 56, 86). In Gurū Nānak's verses in the *Gurū Granth*, however, Kabīr's name does not occur. W.H. McLeod accepts Kabīr's death in 1518 as a possibility, but classifies the meeting between the two as highly improbable. The related question of Gurū Nānak's possible acquaintance with Kabīr's poems, answered in the positive by the Sikh tradition, has been accepted by N. Dass in the context of the modern theory of intertextuality, but called into question, on grounds that positive documentary evidence is entirely lacking, by other Sikh scholars, notably G.S. Mann and Pashaura Singh (Dass, 2003, 8–13; Mann, 2001, 105–108; P. Singh, 2003, 17). G.S. Mann and Pashaura Singh set the traditional accounts describing the acceptance of Kabīr and other *sants* as Nānak's disciples into the broader framework of debates within the Sikh community about the status of non-Sikh *bhagats*' poems (*bhagat bāṇī*) within the *Gurū Granth*.

The Issue of Authorship

Kabīr composed his poems and distichs in oral form. We have no definitive information about whether he could read and write, but some verses attributed to him speak of a distrust and dislike of the written

word. Composition, presentation, and the passing on of verses in oral form open the possibility of textual variations emerging from specific performative contexts, language or dialect-related factors, and the dispositions of singers. We can assume that first variants appeared soon after Kabīr's death; they certainly existed in the third quarter of the 16th century in the first extant collections of devotional poems that also included works with his signature. In the context of Rajasthani Dādūpanthī and Sikh anthologies (*bāṇīs*) of devotional poems (called *pads* in the Rajasthani manuscripts and *śabads* in the *Gurū Granth*) the signature (called *bhaṇitā*, *mudrikā*, or *chāp*) consisted of the phrase *kahai kabīra* ("says Kabīr"), introducing the main point or final summary of the poem. In the case of couplets (*śaloks* of the Sikh scripture, or *sākhīs* of the Rajasthani tradition and the *Bijak*), the name is introduced at the beginning of the first line; in the majority of instances, it is just a marker of authorship, but sometimes it has to be understood as an integral part of the distich, and sometimes as the subject of a sentence. However, the name of the poet introduced in the signature did not necessarily mean authorship in the modern sense of the word. Often, the name served as authoritative confirmation of the message conveyed by the poem or couplet, hence the term *chāp* (lit. stamp). Attributions of songs or poems composed by later authors to their revered *gurūs* were relatively frequent in the milieu of medieval *bhakti*; with particular focus on Sūrdās, this phenomenon has been described by J.S. Hawley (Hawley, 2005, 21–47), while the motives for appending the signature of Nānak to poems of subsequent Sikh *gurūs* were mentioned, for example, by V. Dharwadker (2003, 61). There is little reason to doubt that similar processes were at work in the case of the transmission of ideas imbued with the spirit of Kabīr. Outside of the Sikh canon, in the Dādūpanthī corpus, we can find at least one unmistakable example of secondary attribution in a poem with the *chāp* of Kabīr, which is only a slight paraphrase of a *pad* attributed to the Nāth *yogī* Gorakhnāth and found in the *Gorakhbānī* (Callewaert, Sharma & Taillieu, 2000, 295, no. 186; Barāthvala, 1960, 106–107).

Apart from giving rise to numerous textual variants, the oral transmission of poems attributed to Kabīr and other poets of the Sant tradition across a wide area of North India resulted in the formation of a shared vocabulary and phraseology that described their common spiritual attitudes and experiences. This factor should be taken into account in debates about direct borrowings or mutual influences of particular verses or poems attributed to particular *sants*

(for contexts of living oral transmission of Kabīr's or Kabīr-attributed texts in Nāth *yogī* communities in Rajasthan, see Bahadur Singh, 2002, 191–198; Gold, 2002, 143–156). On the formal level, this process is reflected by the development of the so-called Sadhukkari Bhasha ("Language of Renunciates"), a peculiar mix of North Indian dialects and a kind of *lingua franca* of religious discourse of the time.

Kabīr in the Oldest Rajasthani Manuscript

The first hard evidence of Kabīr's popularity in western parts of India is found in the so-called Fatehpur manuscript, entitled *Pada Sūradāsa jī kā*, preserved in the library of the rulers of Jaipur and dated to 1582 (Bahura, 1984). It includes 15 poems attributed to Kabīr, four of which can be found in variant readings in the *Gurū Granth*. There is still another poem (Bahura, 1984, 131–133) that lacks any attribution whatsoever, but also has a parallel version in the *Gurū Granth* and the Rajasthani corpus. The poem describes a godless man who lives his adult life without god (*deva*) or pilgrimage (*tīrtha*). In the *Gurū Granth* (GG. p. 479), the word *tīrtha* is omitted and the poem is attributed to Kabīr. Ten years later, it appears in a Dādūpanthī manuscript dated 1614–1615, again with the signature of Kabīr, and substitutes the word *deva* with Rāma. We can see a popular moralizing song being gradually appropriated by two communities of *bhakti* devotees, each making editorial changes and assimilating its content so as to suit its own doctrinal position. The attribution of the poem to Kabīr may not be older than the final recension of the *Kartārpur Pothī* by Gurū Arjan. None of the 15 abovementioned poems appears in the oldest manuscripts of the Sikh tradition, the so-called *Goindvāl Pothī*.

Kabīr in the *Goindvāl Pothī*

The form and content of these two manuscripts, at present located in Jalandhar and Pinjore, and regarded as primary sources for the compilation of the *Kartārpur Pothī* (1604), have been critically examined by G.S. Mann (Mann, 1996; 2001, 40–51), who has dated them to 1570–1572. As the *Goindvāl Pothī* also include compositions attributed to *bhagats*, they represent the earliest extant sources of Sikh, as well as non-Sikh, *bhakti* literature. However, these two manuscripts represent probably

only half of the original corpus compiled at that time, with two other manuscripts believed to be lost. As many as 50 out of the total number of 148 poems of non-Sikh *bhagats* included in the two extant manuscripts are attributed to Kabīr. Of this number, five poems are not found in the standard edition of the *Gurū Granth*, and of these five, two are unique to the *Goindvāl Pothī*.

In the general system of primary ordering of hymns by *rāgas*, which was introduced here for the first time as the main principle of internal structuring of the text, the compositions of *bhagats* are found at the end of each *rāga* section, and appear to have been written by a different hand. In contrast to sections that include the hymns of the Sikh *gurūs* and are further subdivided by authors, the sections of hymns written by *bhagats* lack such internal ordering. However, attention was paid to the authorship of individual poems, each of which carried its appropriate attribution. In poems attributed to Kabīr, we find his name spelled either as *Kabīra* (*Kabīru*) or *Kamīra* (*Kamīru*). In several instances, the inscription carries one variant of the name, whereas the *bhaṇitā* in the last verse uses the other. V. Dharwadker (2003, 12–14) offers several possible explanations for this fact; it seems that the poems have been assembled from two different lines of transmission. J.S. Deol (2001, 43) has noted that in the Jalandhar *pothī*, one *śabad* of Kabīr appears in two variant forms, indicating that the compiler worked with at least two different sources. In the case of the above-mentioned Fatehpur manuscript, we can observe a similar process of putting together three originally separate exemplars. Gurū Amar Dās (1479–1574) was the first Sikh *gurū* to mention the name of Kabīr, and it was probably his decision to incorporate texts of Kabīr, and of several other *sants*, into the emerging Sikh scripture:

Nāmdev the printer and Kabīr the weaver obtained salvation through the perfect *gurū*. Gods and men sing their *bānis*, no one can wipe them away, o brother! In divine knowledge they recognized the *śabad* and threw away egoism and caste. (GG, p. 67)

It has been suggested that Gurū Amar Dās may have discovered and collected works of Kabīr during his frequent wanderings as a spiritual seeker before joining the Sikh community (Mann, 2001, 109–111; P. Singh, 2003, 86). In his view, the divine revelation of eternal truth was a constant process, and *bhaṭṭā bāṇī* was an integral part of it. This inclusivist attitude helped open the expanding Sikh community to all who shared their vision of social equality

and moral and religious responsibility to the one God. Views of *bhagats* whose compositions were included in the corpus, but were not found to be in complete agreement with those of the *gurūs* were occasionally commented on by them.

Bhagat Bāṇī in the Kartārpur Pothī and Gurū Granth

When Gurū Arjan prepared the great compilation of Sikh scriptures, the so-called *Kartārpur Pothī*, on which the later copies of the *Gurū Granth* were based, he retained the basic principles of internal ordering applied for the first time by Gurū Amar Dās in the *Goindvāl Pothī*. Compositions of the *bhagats* are again incorporated at the end of each *rāga* section, and introduced by the phrase *bāṇī bhagatā kī* (“words of the *bhagats*”). No further subdivision by author was introduced here, a feature that was carried over into the standard edition of the *Gurū Granth*. As the extant *Goindvāl Pothī* represent only part of the original textual corpus, it is impossible to say whether the new compositions of the *bhagats* (or which of them) that appear in the *Kartārpur Pothī* and later in the standard edition of *Gurū Granth* were carried over from the now missing *Goindvāl Pothī*, or were added later by Gurū Arjan, who may have had still other sources at his disposal. This uncertainty also pertains to compositions of Kabīr. During the process of copying, some selection was made, and several compositions of the *bhagats* were deleted from the *Kartārpur Pothī*, including two *śaloks* and two *śabads* by Kabīr, probably because of their strongly heterodox tantric content (Mann, 2001, 117). The standard edition of the *Gurū Granth* respects this editorial decision, and takes over the rest of Kabīr’s compositions into its *bhagat bāṇī* sections.

The Śaloks

The *Gurū Granth* section that includes the *śaloks* attributed to Kabīr bears the title *Śaloka Bhagata Kabīra Jīu ke*, and spans pages 1364–1377 of the standard *Gurū Granth* edition, adding up to a total of 243 couplets. Of these, 10 are attributed to other authors (P. Singh, 2003, 83). Of the remaining 233 *śaloks*, only 17 can be identified as having their more or less exact parallels in both the Rajasthani *Kabīrvāṇī* collections (the Shree Sanjay Sharma Museum &

Research Institute, Jaipur, MS 3190, dated 1614-1615, and the standard *Kabīr Granthāvalī* edition of Śyāmasundaradāsa, both totaling over 800 *sākhīs*) and the eastern Kabīrpanthī collection, called *Bijak* (different versions of which include between 248 and 384 *sākhīs*: Hess & Singh, 1986, 166). However, if the *Bijak* is excluded from the comparison, the relationship between the Rajasthani and Sikh traditions appears to be much closer: the *Gurū Granth* has 112 *śaloks* (or 48%) in common with the Rajasthani corpus. In contrast to the latter, which structures the vast pool of its *sākhīs* into chapters called *aṅgas*, the *Gurū Granth* does not sort individual *śaloks* into thematic groups. There is also no resemblance between the two collections as far as the sequential ordering of the couplets is concerned. Both the Dādūpanthī and Sikh traditions appear to have drawn their material from the vast common receptacle of already existing oral tradition and to have structured it differently according to their own needs.

The Śabads

Śabads, literally “words” (in the context of North Indian *bhakti*, the term often carries the meaning “transcendental sound”), are poems to be sung. It was probably Gurū Amar Dās who made the decision to include compositions of 15 different non-Sikh *bhagats* in the Sikh scripture, in the so called *bhagat bānī* sections of the *rāga* chapters. Of these, the most numerous are *śabads* that bear the signature of Kabīr. In total, the *Gurū Granth* includes 224 *śabads* with his name; of this number, 22 can be identified as more or less close variants of *śabdās* or *ramainīs* (longer poems in the *caupāī* meter) found in the *Bijak* (Vaudeville, 1982, 457–459), whereas 94 have their counterparts in *pads* that are included in the oldest, extant *Kabīrvāṇī* Rajasthani collections (see above). This already high number grows to 132 if the comparison includes nine other early Dādūpanthī and Vaiṣṇava manuscripts edited and collated by W. Callewaert, S. Sharma, and D. Tailieu (2000, 11). In other words, more than half of the poems included in the *Gurū Granth* with the signature of Kabīr has close parallels in the 17th-century Dādūpanthī and Vaiṣṇava collections. This fact again testifies to the early existence of a vast repertory of Kabīr-attributed poems in western and northwestern India. A close comparison of their variant readings in different manuscripts shows that before being written down, these poems must have been transmitted and circulated in oral form: their

internal structure, with changes in the sequence of verses, additions, and contractions, as well as changes in the *rāga* melodies in which they were sung reflect the oral and performative character of their original presentations.

Like the compositions by Sikh *gurūs* and other *bhagats*, the poems of Kabīr collected in the *Gurū Granth* were intended to be sung in the community of devotees, and were accordingly distributed into 17 different *rāgas* indicating specific modes of singing (the total number of *rāgas* in the *Gurū Granth* is 31). The poems are of unequal length, and their internal structure varies. Generally, the first stanza is followed by the refrain (*rahāu*), consisting of two short lines, or one short and one long. The two lines in the refrain and in the stanza rhyme together. Rhymes are often grammatical.

Apart from *śaloks* and *śabads*, the *Gurū Granth* also includes three longer poems, placed at the end of the *rāga gauṛī* section. Of these, the longest is *Bāvana Akharī* (Fifty-two Letters; *GG*. p. 340–342), which, in the medium of Old Hindi, recreates a play on words developed in classical Sanskrit literature, where each letter of the alphabet inspires a verse or a sentence. In Kabīr’s poems, the verses have spiritual meaning and are introduced by a pun that combines two senses of the word *akhara*: “letter” or “syllable”, and “imperishable.” Verse 7, for example, exemplifies the letter *ka* through the words *kiraṇī* (ray of light), *kamala* (lotus), *kusuma* (flower), and concludes the verse with the question “how can one express the ineffable, to whom can it be explained?” (*akaha kahā kahi kā samajhāvā*). The other two compositions, *Thitī* (Lunar Dates; *GG*. p. 343–344) and *Vār* (Days in the Week; *GG*. p. 344–345), remind the reciter and listener of their spiritual duties in the course of a fortnight and a week.

Kabīr’s Profile in the Gurū Granth

A great number of Kabīr’s poems included in the *Gurū Granth* resonated with the basic principles of Sikh teaching. L. Hess (1987, 111–141) has compared the profile of Kabīr in the three main collections of his works, and counted frequencies of selected key words occurring in them in order to show, in a relatively exact way, the spectrum of topics and specific accents peculiar to each of them. In the *Gurū Granth*, the five most frequent terms are, in descending order, *bhagatī* (spiritual devotion), Rām, the word/name, Hari, and *gurū*. The Rajasthani *Kabīr Granthāvalī* is dominated by the same set, only in a

slightly different order: Rām, *bhakti*, Hari, the word/name, and *guru*. It may be assumed that the obvious thematic affinity between the Rajasthani profile of Kabīr, on the one hand, and the most important principles of Sikh *bhagatī*, on the other, was an important source of motivation on the part of Sikh *gurūs* to include Kabīr's verses in their scripture.

The most important and most popular themes addressed by Kabīr's verses in the *Gurū Granth* include the requirement of unconditional love and devotion to the lord, and the practice of remembering his name. In the *Gurū Granth* page 328, within the short span of three lines, the lord whose name should be constantly remembered is specified as Khasama ("Lord"), Hari, and Rāma. God is also Allāh, creator of the primordial light, who dwells in the world and the world in him. Kabīr's poem in the *Gurū Granth* page 1157 is a hymn extolling the name; page 970 scolds a Brahman who recites the *Vedas* and the *gāyatrīmantra*, but forgets to utter the name, Hari, and Rāma; a Brahman and a *mullā* (Muslim priest, religious teacher, or jurist) are exhorted to give up their rituals, and turn instead to the inward religious service. In the *Gurū Granth* page 1158, a *mullā* is advised to transform his mind into Mecca and his body into the *qiblah* (direction faced when praying); Hindus and Muslims have the same lord. In another poem Kabīr starts with the questions:

Where did the Hindus and Muslims come from?
Who has put them on their paths? Reading and
studying, people finally die without realizing the
real message (*khābaru*).

What is the point of circumcision? If God willed
me to be a Muslim, he would circumcise me him-
self; and how about woman? Being uncircum-
cised, is she a Hindu for that? (*GG*. p. 477)

In other songs, this belligerent style of questioning is directed against Hindus, and occasionally also against *yogīs* (Punj. *jogī*).

The Kabīr of the *Gurū Granth*, and also of the Rajasthani tradition, had a more complex relationship with the *yogīs*, particularly those of the Nāth *yogī* tradition. (Offredi, 2002, 127–141). Both collections include *śābads* (resp. *pads*) that are deeply imbued with Nāth *yogī* symbolism and terminology. In the *Gurū Granth* page 969, the exercise leading to *sahaj*, the state of supreme bliss, is likened to the process of alcohol distillation in which the body functions as an alembic. All the necessary ingredients are there: true knowledge stands for sugar, concentration is likened to sweet *mahuā* flowers (bot.

Madhuca longifolia), worldly existence is the oven. In the process, desire and anger are burned up. The light of the true knowledge arises, and the ultimate understanding (*sudhī*) is granted by the supreme *gurū* (*satigurū*). Thus, at the highest level at least, and in the decisive moment of the process, the result of autonomous efforts and exercises on the part of the *yogī* adept is salvaged and made meaningful through the intercession of the lord. Similarly, in the *Gurū Granth* page 333, when the *yogī* turns his breath inward, pierces the six *cakras* of the body with it, and directs his consciousness toward the ultimate void (Punj. *sumni*; from Skt. *śūnya*), he is reminded that the correct understanding has been granted to him by the grace of the *gurū*. The process of integration of an originally independent spiritual current into the new framework of devotional *bhakti* can be best traced in these originally Nāth *yogī* poems. One poem (*GG*. p. 334) directly addresses the uncertainty and consequent anguish of an adept who asks about his fate when his body, the subject of all his exercises and blissful experiences, one day perishes ("the thread is snapped"). On the final line, Kabīr offers his own solution: day and night, his loving devotion is directed toward Abināsī ("The Imperishable One"), because only he knows his own mystery.

Together with the Nāth *yogī* imagery, compilers of *Gurū Granth* also accepted a few of the so-called *uṭṭabāṃsī* poems and riddles composed in the "upside down language," which more frequently occur in the eastern *Bījak* recension of Kabīr's *śābads* (Hess, 1983; Hess & Singh, 1986). For example, in the *Gurū Granth* page 481, the world is turned on its head: first comes the son, his mother is born later; *gurūs* sit at the feet of their disciples; a lion grazes cows, and a fish gives birth upon a tree. The branches are below, the roots are above. This tree bears fruits and blossoms. The image of a tree that bears fruit and blossoms with branches below and roots above, apart from being popular in the Nāth lore, appears to be of considerable antiquity and is mentioned already in the *Bhagavadgīta* (*BhG*. 15.1).

The occasional invocation of Hindu deities found in his *śābads* raises the question of the existence or absence of a unitary spiritual vision in the *bāñīs* of Kabīr that are included in the *Gurū Granth*. There are a few poems in which *bhakti* is expressed in terms of Vaiṣṇava devotionism, for example the legend of the devout *bhakta* Prahlāda who was saved from deadly wrath of his murderous father by Narasiṃha, one of the *avatārs* of Viṣṇu (*GG*. p. 1194), or the wedding song depicting the union of the soul with the

lord in terms of *saguṇ bhakti* (GG. p. 482). But in others (e.g. GG. pp. 1162–1163), gods of the Hindu pantheon are summoned to demonstrate their subservient status and to reflect the incomparable greatness of the one true God (“a million Durgās come to massage his feet”). Even in the iconoclastic devotionism of the North Indian *sants*, Hindu gods were conceived, from the point of view of the final goal of spiritual liberation, as either irrelevant or as an obstacle, rather than simply nonexistent. In the *Gurū Granth*, when the term *niragun* (Skt. *nirguṇa*) occurs in the sense of God “without attributes,” it is often coupled with the word *saragun* (Skt. *saguṇa*), “possessing all attributes” (on the historical aspects of the *saguṇa/nirguṇa* classification, see Hawley, 2005, 70–86).

More problematic, at least from the point of view of the Sikh *gurūs* who categorically denounced begging and mendicant life in general, may have been Kabīr’s conviction that the total concentration and absolute devotion to the lord, required of a true *bhakta*, are basically incompatible with the life and responsibilities of the householder and can lead to conflicts with the broader society. Particularly sharp formulations of this idea occur in his *śaloks*, whose brevity and terseness offers the ideal medium for uncompromising and categoric statements. They reveal his doubts concerning family life as a suitable environment for the *bhakta* who has chosen the service of the lord as the main or sole aim of his life. In several places, the care for one’s family and offspring are said to be inferior to the spiritual path. In the *Gurū Granth* page 1366, Kabīr has abandoned all other activities and devotes himself solely to God. In a rare autobiographical verse (GG. p. 1370), he complains that his family has been destroyed by the birth of his son Kamāl, who, instead of serving God, brought wealth into the house. *Gurū Granth* page 1372 warns that entanglements connected with family life tend to push devotion to God aside: in a moment, death will intervene and put a sudden end to all this hustle bustle. Similarly, the *Gurū Granth* page 1376 speaks of a man who raised a large family, and when he died, the world was not moved. In the last *śalok* of the *Gurū Granth* collection, Kabīr returns to the problem of the householder and gives his final advice:

Either lead an orderly family life, or choose the life
of an ascetic.

But as an ascetic, you should eschew all bonds and
ties, otherwise you will get into deep trouble.
(GG. p. 1377)

Similar thoughts can also be found in *śabads*, particularly in those which contain some autobiographic information. The most pregnant formulation is found in a short poem (GG. p. 524), which has variants in almost all old Rajasthani collections of Kabīr’s verses. Kabīr realizes that his occupation of spinning and weaving prevents him from concentrating on the love of God. His mother weeps and beseeches him to stay – how will the children survive? Kabīr has but a short answer: “The lord alone will provide for us and them.” The symbolic poem in *Gurū Granth* page 335 depicts the weaver dissatisfied with his worldly occupation and leaving his loom in anger. In the last line, Kabīr gives the final advice: “Renounce the world, as long as you are here, o poor soul.” At the end of a short poem in *Gurū Granth* page 1162, describing his miraculous rescue after he was thrown in chains into a river, Kabīr proclaims the following: “I have no friend, no companion. On the water and on the land, my protector is the lord.” This is not exactly in line with the high value which the Sikh tradition places on the life in a community of devotees.

Kabīr turned his back on the world and became a homeless ascetic; but he has moments when he is not sure whether God approves of it:

I have no shelter, no hut, I have no house, no
village;
let the lord not ask who I am – I have no caste, no
name. (GG. p. 1367)

In the next couplet, Kabīr wants to die at the door of the lord; but again, he hopes that God will not ask about his identity. In several places, the exclusive attachment to the lord is described as a complete severing of all other bonds, most clearly:

No one belongs to me, I belong to no one;
merge into him who created this creation.
(GG. p. 1376)

Pashaura Singh (2003, 83) attributes this *śalok* to Gurū Arjan, but similar statements can also be found in the Rajasthani *Kabīr Granthāvalī* (e.g. Callewaert, Sharma & Taillieu, 2000, 346, no. 236.3; 508, no. 398.3). Kabīr appears to be basically an individualist stressing the role of man’s own activity and – in contrast to the Sikh understanding of God’s relationship to man – is not always sure that these efforts will finally be blessed by his grace. One verse (GG. p. 1367) represents the theme as the relationship of man to woman: she has ground herself into powder and made herself into henna; but he has not

said a word and has never applied her to his feet. Gurū Amar Dās (GG. p. 947) attempts to correct the impression of helplessness and despair conveyed by the verse and gives it an opposite, positive meaning: God accepts the love, and himself makes the devotee into henna: “This is the cup of love of the lord: he gives it to whomever he chooses.”

However, there are *śabads* and *śaloks* in the *Gurū Granth* corpus of Kabīr’s verses that show a more positive attitude toward the company of true *bhaktas* and *sants*, and praise their beneficial role in helping others in their efforts to find the right path to God. These verses are often coupled with warnings against the depraved and wicked who can divert men from the right path. The Sikh *gurūs* and Kabīr share an intense dislike of the Śāktas. Kabīr’s *śaloks* include verses that denounce them in strong, often abusive terms (GG. pp. 1365, 1367, 1369, 1371, 1372). Although warnings against associating with the wicked, often coupled with the opposite advice to seek the company of the worthy, are a frequent theme in the Indian tradition of *nīti* literature (maxims and treatises on worldly wisdom), the focus on the particular community of Śāktas appears to be specific to Kabīr, and the force of his attacks has no parallel elsewhere in the *sant* literature (for a more detailed treatment of the image of Śāktas in the works of Kabīr, Tulsīdās, and Harirām Vyās, see Pauwels, 2010, 509–539; for the frequency of the term in the works of *sants*, see Callewaert, 1991). In the Sikh tradition, the term Śākta appears early on in poems of Gurū Nānak, and soon its meaning broadens to include all depraved, faithless people (Pauwels, 2010, 517). To some extent, these views might have resonated with those of Kabīr; however, the Sikh position appears to avoid total condemnation, and to leave the door open to a possible change of heart on the part of the sinner. *Śaloks* 210 and 211, which are included in the Kabīr collection but attributed to Gurū Arjan, can be interpreted in this way (P. Singh, 2003, 103). Interestingly, Anantdās, an ascetic of the Rāmānandī tradition and the author of an early collection of hagiographies, the so-called *parcaīs*, of North Indian *bhaktas* (c. 1600), mentions in the chapter devoted to Kabīr that, for a long time, this *bhakta* from Kashi (Banaras) kept company with Śāktas, but later took the vow to serve Hari (Callewaert & Sharma, 2000, 55; Lorenzen, 1991, 93, 129).

In the corpus of Kabīr’s verses, one can sense a distanced, if not inimical attitude toward writing. The *Bāvana Akharī* (vv. 6.1, 2) highlights the contrast between *likhi* (writing) and *lakhi* (experiencing): he who writes will be destroyed, he who sees

Oankār (“The One”) will not. In a parallel to this (v. 45.3), a *paṇḍit* (learned Brahman, Hindu teacher) is presented as busy with worldly things, whereas the true knower understands the “real.” (*tatu*). Another verse (GG. p. 1373) returns to this point and admonishes us to give up doubts, abandon the paper, fix the mind on the feet of God, and contemplate the 52 syllables. Another *śalok* (GG. p. 1368) points out the inadequacy of the pen, ink, and paper, and praises the glory of God. And in the *Gurū Granth* page 1371, Kabīr speaks of a small dark chamber made of paper, and of the rites of ink (prescribed rituals) as its door leaves – a dramatic image of paper and writing as a dark prison.

It may be that the unquestionable authority which Kabīr already enjoyed as the most profound, pure, and morally irreproachable *bhakta* ultimately influenced the *gurūs*’ decision to also include poems expressing individualistic, implacable positions that were not in complete agreement with their own in the *Gurū Granth*. In one of the few *pads* included in variant readings in the *Bijak*, the *Kabīr Granthāvalī*, and the *Gurū Granth*, Kabīr explains why he who spent almost his entire life in the holy city of Kashi chooses to die in the poor village of Maghar. The context, unspoken but known to everybody, was the belief that dying in Banaras would liberate the man from future rebirths. Kabīr’s decision is the ultimate test of the spiritual integrity of the *sant*:

If Kabīr leaves his body in Kashi, then what is the point to turning to God (Rām)? Says Kabīr: listen, o people, let nobody be in doubt – what is Kashi, what the barren land of Maghar, if Rām dwells in the heart? (GG. p. 692)

Conclusion

The corpus of texts attributed to the medieval mystic and poet Kabīr, and included in the Sikh scripture during the early stages of its formation, represents an extremely valuable document in at least two respects. It is the earliest, and at the same time relatively accurately datable, body of compositions with the signature of Kabīr, and as such of great importance for the comparative analysis of poems and couplets that appear under his name in Rajasthani Dādūpanthī and Vaiṣṇava manuscripts, and in the eastern Kabīrpanthī *Bijak*. One and a half centuries after his death, compositions circulating under his name, mostly in oral form, in vast areas of northern and western India absorbed different regional influences, predominantly of Nāth *yogī*

and Vaiṣṇava origin. Kabīr's poetry reflected on and answered to a wide range of themes, questions, spiritual and social issues, particularly from the lower strata of medieval Indian society. Answers found in his poems and couplets are varied, and cannot be subsumed under any one particular dogma. He was able to present his ideas in a forceful and expressive way that retains its quality almost undiluted even after numerous rephrasings by generations of singers and in different dialects. This was probably the main reason why Kabīr was accepted as an undisputed spiritual authority by the young and undogmatic Sikh community, whose *gurūs* were also ready to respect those of his positions that were not wholly their own. Their decision to include his compositions, under the rubric of *bhagat bānī*, together with those of other non-Sikh *bhagats*, into the emerging structure of the *Gurū Granth* endowed their scripture with an ecumenical character, a feature that reflected the high level of their spiritual vision and helped attract new members to their fold. From the point of view of the subsequent development of the Sikh community, this second aspect of Kabīr's influence is in no way less important than the purely historical value and literary quality of his *Gurū Granth* corpus.

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